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COVER STORY

Channel-surfing is the logical response to the boredom of watching television. Once you finally click the thing off, more rewarding, more lasting activities fill what was a void

Out of the wasteland

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If it was 5 p.m. it had to be Inside Politics, with Judy Woodruff (married to Wall Street Journal reporter Al Hunt of the weekend gabfest Capital Gang) and Bernard Shaw (who was vaulted to an anchor desk after saying, from under a hotel-room table during the 1991 bombing of Baghdad, "If there's a hell, it must be like this"). Judy and Bernie started delivering political dish during the Gennifer Flowers scandal.

The News Hour would follow on PBS with dry Jim Lehrer, for overview and deep background (well, as deep as you can squeeze into 15-to-30-minute segments).

At 7:30 p.m., after Access Hollywood (or That's Hockey!), I'd settle into Crossfire, a shouting match involving legislators, advocates and sundry newsmakers. By now, I was primed to talk back to the TV with epithets like, "You bogus, blithering, bull—ing bumpkin!" or "Liar, liar, pants on fire!" I found myself formulating arguments of my own, as if I might be dragged into the crossfire at a moment's notice. I relished spotting spittle spritz out of the mouth of crusty columnist co-host Bob Novak; sometimes it just lay there on his lower lip.

The highlight of the day was Larry King Live at 9, "the only worldwide live talk presentation" ("If Saddam Hussein is watching, this is your chance to respond!"). Larry lobs softball questions; guests congratulate him on the child born of his eighth marriage. If I had something more pressing to do, I could catch him repeated at midnight. This was not a good idea, due to fancy channel-surfing: Charlie Rose on PBS at 11:30 (I loved to loathe this Manhattan society man who likes to hear the sound of his own voice – the media mag Brill's Content ran a Rose "Interrupt-O-Meter") and, at the same time, Nightline hosted by terrible Ted Koppel (once offered a job as spokesman for the secretary of state, but, the way he talks down to guests, seems to want the whole enchilada). Then there's David Letterman and Politically Incorrect With Bill Maher, ostensibly left-riots.

Watching talk TV became so obsessive that I kept a clipboard positioned strategically on my couch to document the tics and faux pas of pundits, hosts and guests alike. The remains of my day were scribbles, exclamation points, underlines, arrows. I got so crazed that in 1992 I devoted 11,500 words to the TV talk-show genre, my longest article ever. But I couldn't stop there! I kept adding stuff; my computer brims with 45,500 bon mots on talk shows. The idea for a book took seed. Better yet, an encyclopedia! So when I'm researching some trenchant piece, I can roam my own encyclopedia!

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More than 98 per cent of North American homes include a TV, and three-quarters of those households have two or more (with 65 per cent of kids boasting one in their room). I've never minded being part of what they call a "thoughtful minority" – heh heh – but statistics like these, and the reactions of my friends, make me feel like a freak. "How do you survive without one?" they ask, as if I also do without toilet paper. Ted Kaczynski lived without TV, but not "normal" people. (Besides, look where Ted ended up – in a cell with a TV set rooted to the wall.)

A part of me wanted to rediscover some redeeming feature of TV, so I wouldn't be among that insufferable elite that knows what's good for everyone else. Hey, it's not as if I'm nature boy. The sounds of the street and man-made inventions have always been miasma to me. The only way you could lead me into the wilderness is if you popped the magic question: "Who wants to be a millionaire?"

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Back in front of the TV in the Boston hotel room, I find myself watching Nightline.

Omigod, the Concorde's crashed! A background-er: "It is the Ferrari of the air." (Remind me to buy a Pinto, if I ever learn to drive.) Ted Koppel: best hair in the news biz, hands down. It's got a life of its own, looks like a bad Beatles wig, but it's real because you can tell when he hasn't washed it (he's s-o-o busy rewriting those life-and-death questions he asks). Thank goodness the hair's intact – gives me something to muse upon – when he coaxes an eye-witness: "It's not something you could easily miss ..." Well, duh. Mister News, and that's all he can muster? (Something worthy of – Geraldo?) And, to an aviation "expert": "Before you tell us what went wrong, perhaps you can tell us what has to go right ..."

Click.

Don Rickles on Letterman. First time I've seen Dave since the Heart Attack. He looks tanned and fit. I remember Don from Johnny Carson, way back when he didn't laugh at anybody else's jokes. Now Dave says deferentially, "We want you to spruce things up – drop your pants and fire a rocket!" Don cracks up, they exchange high-fives, hair-dye-bar.

Click.

RICHARD DREW, AP

After 15 years as co-host with Regis Philbin (left), Kathie Lee Gifford gets a cake to mark her departure from their morning talk show. Her last appearance on Live With Regis and Kathie Lee was on July 28.

COURTESY OF ABC

Ted Koppel: best hair in the biz.

"Take this TV back ... the programs on this one are really lousy!"

Designer Coco Chanel

Guinness World Records on Fox: Yves Rossy, nutty Frenchman performing the "human plane-to-plane link." Yep, each arm holding onto a wing of a pair of vintage Snoopy-type craft. Announcer wails: "Lucky he didn't get his arms ripped off!"

Click.

Promo for ESPN's Inside Baseball: "It will obviously be – trade, trade, trade, trade, trade talk."

Click.

Larry King's chit-chatting with all nine female members of the U.S. Senate. "It's cozy, uh, Larry King Live baseball team," clumsily echoing A League of Their Own. Increasingly, Larry resembles a cross between George Hamilton as Dracula and Ichabod Crane. Upon closer inspection – has Larry dyed his hair? Is that brown coming through the shoe-polish black – or have I never noticed before (or is it the tint on my screen)? I've always had a soft spot for Larry; so have the ladies, prone to cooing "Oh, Larry ..." He doesn't have to play at being dumb ("What if Hillary wins? She's got a high profile – she'll be the only senator with Secret Service protection").

And yet. Something is happening and I do know what it is, Mr. Jones: I find myself talking to the TV set. Kibbitzing at the inanities news people, celebrities, politicians routinely utter for want of anything else to say. Déjà vu all over again.

Click OFF.

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We were vetting one of my Trivial Pursuit questions: "What weeknight did NBC dub Must See TV?" Answer: Thursday. My editor, an intelligent fellow, said: "This is flat-out wrong. NBC meant it for every night." Nope, I said, it was Thursday. Things started getting heated. I went into a paint-by-numbers explanation: how Seinfeld anchored Thursday's lineup of sitcoms, then ER added the knockout punch that would keep folks tuned in until the local news at 11, and Leno after that, so NBC effectively owned prime-time Thursdays, and rival networks would be nuts to put something worthwhile up against it, and now, with Seinfeld gone, NBC is in a well-documented crisis – Page 1 of the N.Y. Times! – as it sees once-untouchable Thursdays disintegrate.

My editor wouldn't budge, so I asked him, "Well, where do you get your information that says every night is Must See TV?"

"Because, I watch TV!" he blurted, clearly intimating that I was hopelessly out of the loop because I didn't.

Gee, what a lame comeback. I had to restrain myself from saying, "Don't jump to any conclusions from watching TV." (Thursday was the correct answer, as if it matters.)

On evenings when my two colleagues and I went out to eat, my eyes glazed over as they recounted situations from Seinfeld, or skits from Saturday Night Live, or Letterman gags – and I hadn't a clue what they were talking about. I could have been a Martian visiting Earth. And I realized I couldn't give a rat's ass about what they were saying; it seemed to have no connection whatsoever with, um, life.

So it's come to this: I've become holier-than-thou. I resist the temptation to tell friends, "Maybe you should watch a little less TV" or "Why don't you try going a week without it?" I began to realize how friends must feel when they urge me to go a week without smoking. You wind up sounding like some drone – or Ted Kaczynski.

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Browsing about bookshops in Harvard Square, I stumbled across Four Arguments in Favor of the Elimination of Television, the 1977 classic by former ad executive Jerry Mander. Writ large, he deals with concepts like The Colonization of Experience and Television Is Sensory Deprivation. I remember the book being big in Berkeley, Calif., where I spent six years listening to anti-TV tirades by politically correct folks glued to Bill Moyers, John Bradshaw and Robert Bly spewing New Age psychobabble on PBS.

"Imitation is the sincerest form of television."

Comedian Fred Allen

Now the book struck a nerve. Mander paints a grim picture: "Sitting in darkened rooms, with the natural environment obscured, other humans dimmed out, only two senses operating, both within a very narrow range, the eyes and other body functions stilled, staring at light for hours and hours, the experience adds up to something nearer to sense deprivation than anything that has come before it ...

"As distinguished from most sense-deprivation experiments, these mental images are not yours. They are someone else's. Because the rest of your capacities have been subdued, and the rest of the world dimmed, these images are likely to have an extraordinary degree of influence. Am I saying this is brainwashing or hypnosis or mind-napping or something like it? Well, there is no question but that someone is speaking into your mind and wants you to do something.

"First, keep watching.

"Second, carry the images around in your head.

"Third, buy something.

"Fourth, tune in tomorrow."

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Tomorrow never knows? Letterman's in an ironic rant: "Do you want another year of Survivor? No! We're TV watchers – we're easily bored!" On comes Kathie Lee, spilling out of a tight dress. "They like my dress! I got it at a great little sweatshop downtown." She says she can't say this type of stuff on the morning show: "That's why I can't wear this dress – Dave, I wanna break out!"

Click.

William Shatner is on Politically Incorrect.

Click.

Joan Rivers, who's had so much plastic surgery she's beginning to look like her mutant daughter, is on Larry King. She's harping over being suspended for saying a dirty word on her own talk show. Why? "I'm old, I'm a woman ..."

Click.

Commercial: "No relationship is like the one you have with your dog."

Click.

Access Hollywood has an "exclusive" interview with – Kathie Lee: "It's going to be hard leaving the show ... Look, you've got me crying."

Click.

William Shatner again. (Is he flogging a book?) He's on Craig Kilbourn, a smarmy Dennis Miller clone without the beard, who oozes: "Every time you go to a restaurant, everyone stands – it's William Shatner!" Shatner shrugs, "What are you gonna do?" (No, he's flogging a Sandra Bullock flick he has a part in.) "Believe me, Sandra Bullock's not coming on your show." Then he starts chatting about his ego: "I came to Los Angeles with a giant ego ..."

Click OFF.

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I drag a quote book we use for Trivial Pursuit into the toilet and look up television. Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin said: "Nothing is real unless it happens on television." Richard Nixon: "American people don't believe anything until they see it on television." "Before I was shot, I always suspected I was watching TV instead of living life," said Andy Warhol. "Right when I was being shot, I knew I was watching television."

The mad Peter Finch anchorman in Network: "We're in the boredom-killing business." And channel-surfing is the logical response to the boredom of watching television. Or, in pre-remote days, Coco Chanel fumed: "Take this TV back ... the programs on this one are really lousy!"

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In a nutshell: Living without a TV has allowed me to focus on the three activities I love most – writing, listening to music and reading. It's not as if I'm tackling James Joyce's Ulysses ... yet. Hell, I'd rather read an "in-depth" Vanity Fair article on Gwyneth Paltrow's love life than get it on Entertainment Tonight.

The mind works differently when it's asked to read words on a page. The best thing is that you can read them over again, at your own pace, ruminate, and ponder them in silent communion. TV comes and goes, catch as catch can. No matter how many times you rewind a newscast or a talk show, there's a lamentable limit to what you can "get," because you're offered so little in the first place. TV is geared to, and fosters, attention-deficit disorder. Gloria Swanson had it right, in Sunset Boulevard: "It's the pictures that got small."

Reading and writing are casualties of the fixation for compacted, easily digested bits of info. "No one has the time to read long stuff," goes the familiar refrain. Yet, the Internet is touted as a boon to writers (or content-providers, as they are now termed): think of all the people you can reach (this is like catnip to writers). There's a catch: mine is short and snappy. "Long stuff" doesn't look good on the screen. Folks don't bother to scroll down, or print out longer pieces." Write for the immediate bang, or you're dead. Forget about taking the time to seduce the reader into a rhythm, to investigate a subject in serpentine ways. People don't have the time; they're too busy gazing at a TV or a computer screen. They make excuses, offer rationales: they feel "connected." Yeah, connected to a screen. Of course, info bits flit in one ear and out the other, visuals flash by in the blink of an eye, so, when in doubt repeat, repeat, repeat. "Imitation is the sincerest form of television," crusty 'ole comedian Fred Allen once said.

So, I now read a lot. Reading has seduced me into paying much more attention to this rich paean we call life. (How's that for a sound bite?) I hope you might consider reading as an alternative to existence in front of a screen. End of sermon.

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One more thing. I've read that ratings for Live With Regis were up a whopping 36 per cent for his first three weeks without Kathie Lee, compared with the corresponding period last year. Hmmm ... Now I know that those precious minutes I spent in that hotel room watching her hype The Farewell really were wasted.

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